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Women in Modern Theatre: An Ethnodrama

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Ethnodrama

An ethnodrama is a groundbreaking genre of playwriting which highlights certain struggles a society deals with such as racial segregation, poverty, sexuality, identity etc. Ethnodramatic works are unique in that the characters in the play are actually participants in thorough interviews the authors conduct in order to obtain necessary, and often unknown, information from sources who deal with the issues first hand. The interview clips are edited and creatively combined with moving imagery to create a profound and often evocative piece of literature. This arts-based genre of research isn't widely used because of the great level of difficulty in combining journalistic aspects with real-life conflicts to create a play which can be performed. Still, it has been recognized as an effective way to reach out to people and inspire them to make a difference in their community. According to Norman K. Denzin's Qualitative Research, "those who write culture using reflexive interviews are learning to use language in a way that brings people together. These texts do more than move audiences to tears. They criticize the world the way it is, and offer suggestions about how it could be different" (24).

Anna Deavere Smith is one of the founders of the ethnodramatic genre, as well as one of the most well-known actresses in theatre, and began experimenting with interviews in the early 1980s. She told participants "If you give me an hour of your time, I'll invite you to see yourself

performed,” and these interviews later sparked her imagination to create one-woman performance pieces about race and other prominent issues. Smith’s ability to capture real-life portraits and craft them into a play was an innovative approach to blurring the line between theatre and journalism and won her worldwide recognition. She was awarded the prestigious MacArthur Foundation “genius” Fellowship for creating “a new form of theater — a blend of theatrical art, social commentary, journalism and intimate reverie.” Not only did she write plays that had meaning and dealt with modern social, political, or cultural concerns of various societies, but she also toured the world performing solo plays.

One of Anna Deavere Smith’s most well known example of an ethnodrama is Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities. It explored the 1991 clash between Jews and Blacks in New York's Crown Heights community and presented theatrical monologues which originated from interviews with participants and observers of the racial riots. The media and press were shocked at Smith’s courage to address such a controversial issue in a play; nevertheless, they recognized it as a prize-worthy piece. The New York Daily News said, “Anna Deavere Smith turns headlines into pure drama.” Even the New York Times raved, “Fires in the Mirror is, quite simply, the most compelling and sophisticated view of urban racial and class conflict...that one could hope to encounter...spectacular further proof...that the American theater is rising to illuminate these rancorous times with a vitality that may be equaled but is certainly not surpassed by any of our native arts...” This ethnodramatic play was the runner-up for the 1993 Pulitzer Prize, and earned Smith an Obie, Drama Desk and Lucille Lortel award; it was also broadcast on PBS as part of The American Playhouse series. The play was first set on stage at the Joseph Papp Public Theatre in New York but Anna has taken it on tour across the United States and to Australia and London.

Anna was one of the first writers to step forward and inspire people to write about real issues despite their controversy. Ethnodramas became written versions of protests whether they were directed towards people of a certain ethnic background, people of various religious beliefs, or people struggling in a particular society: Smith paved a way for people to use theatre as a means of saying we need change and we can help make a difference in our communities. This idea was further proved in her other very successful and well known ethnodrama called Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992. Newsweek claimed it was “an American masterpiece” and really exemplified her expertise in “documentary theatre.” The play focused on people who experienced the Los Angeles riots and explored the devastating human impact of that event. Smith interviewed over two hundred people in a nine month period and isolated the voices that best exposed the trepidation of a city in chaos. The participants varied from a disabled Korean man, to a white male Hollywood talent agent, to a teenage black gang member, and so forth. Twilight directly dived into issues of race and class and all the subjects people confronted in the wake of the Rodney King verdict. The play received critical acclaim on Broadway and in Los Angeles and won Smith two Tony nominations, an Obie, a Drama Desk Award, two NAACP Theatre Awards, and several other honors.

Anna Deavere Smith’s latest play in the series, House Arrest: First Edition, explores American history in addressing the association between the press and presidency, the issues of slavery and racism, and the civil rights movement. The play touches upon Jefferson’s academic abilities and prestigious reputation as opposed to the idea that he had an affair with one of his slaves. It also discusses Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency and analyzes why the press didn’t concentrate on his affairs or disabilities. Anna includes excerpts from interviews with many significant political figures, such as President Clinton and former President Bush, about the

changes taken place since Roosevelt's administration. The play continues into comparing the assassinations of Lincoln and Kennedy. House Arrest: First Edition exemplifies how an ethnodrama can intertwine historical writing with nearly 400 current interviews in and out of the presidential politics.

According to Denzin, Anna's work is "theatre that mirrors and criticizes society" (34). Oftentimes some of the best books, plays, music, or movies are critical of the world that we live in, and if the issues are important enough it can inspire people to make a difference. Ethnodramas directly mirror the lives of individuals and allow the audience to relate to their characters because the issues presented are so real. Denzin believes, "Words become a means, or method for evoking the character of a person" (34). Smith witnessed the power of words firsthand and learned how to inhabit the words of others, and lace their manner of speech to mark their individuality as people, as well as characters on stage. Smith's goal when conducting interviews is to "create an atmosphere in which the interviewee would experience his/her own authorship. If this space is created, everyone will say something that is like poetry. The process of getting to that poetic moment is where 'character' lives" (34).

The interview process is a significant portion of a successful ethnodramatic play. Denzin said, "Interviews are part of the dialogic conversation that connects all of us to this larger moral community. They transform information into shared experiences" (24). The interview process often appears intimidating because if a person unexpectedly says something aloud, they cannot go back on their word. Still, as the interview gets deeper, a certain trust and security level is established, and the interviewee appears more emotionally involved; he/she feels more comfortable with revealing information which may not have shared with anyone ever before.

Denzin refers to the interview as “an active text, a site where meaning is created and performed” which is exactly what ethnodramas highlight on paper and on stage. (25).

In Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre Johnny Saldana` describes in details the three different ways to approach writing an ethnodrama. The first method uses the individual character-participant as a solo storyteller to format an ethnodramatic monologue: A monologue is often written for characters to share their emotions and tell their story from a personal perspective. Both professional and amateur actors are required to perform monologues in order to audition for jobs, agents, or even specialized programs in schools so it is a key component to the theater. The goal of writing an ethnodramatic monologue “is to capture both the essence and the essentials of a particular individual’s worldview and culture” (37). Saldana` uses Michael Keck’s Voices in the Rain as an example to demonstrate how a playwright can effectively retell the story of another being based on media reports, observations, and, most importantly, interviews; The play invites readers into the lives of incarcerated African American men and those who were released from prison and are trying to find their way back to living a normal life. Other models Saldana` highlighted where the narrator acts as the chief figure in the play were The Glass Menagerie by Tennessee Williams and Our Town by Thornton Wilder.

An ethnodramatic dialogue with monologue is another effectual technique where two or more character participants share a genuine relationship and exchange ideas in a sensible manner. Feeding off your partner, listening to what they are saying, and reacting to their words is an old acting method Stanford Meisner created. The actor is taught to listen to his/her partner rather than anticipate the moment he/she can recite the next line, and that similar idea is reinforced with the ethnodramatic dialogue. Denzin mention that “In an ethnodrama-- and life itself-- social action is interaction; interaction is reaction” (79). Saldana` uses Elissa Fosters’

Storm Tracking: Scenes of Martial Disintegration as a demonstration of how to use both monologue and dialogue successfully with two characters. Vulnerability and painful honesty is revealed in Foster's play when portraying the relationship between a husband and his wife and their inability to communicate with one another. The unfortunate reality is toned down by the it cleverly incorporated humor and irony; the audience is able to experience heightened emotion and a feeling like they can relate what's occurring on stage to their personal lives.

The final section of Ethnodrama the focuses on ethnodramatic extensions and how realistic monologue and dialogue can be extended using a "repertory of theatrical elements, devices, and techniques" (121). Street Rat edited by Johnny Saldana` uses ethnodramatic extensions to depict a day in the lives of homeless teenagers; it was originally written in Macklin Finley's book of poetry but was formatted as a collage of excerpts organized by category rather than a distinct storyline. Saldana` decided to do some of his own research before adapting this creative work into an ethnodrama and went to New Orleans, the location in the poems, around the same time of year of the original story. He assessed the climate and how it affected tourists, observed what local citizens wore to influence his costume for his play, and paid close attention to how kids spoke, their dialects, vocal tones, and appearances to adapt all of these distinct features into the characters. He had informal interviews with the homeless teens and allowed Bourbon Street and the trash littering the grounds to inspire the visual concept for the production. "The purpose of all this description is to emphasize that, aside from the careful development of the ethnodramatic text, ethnotheatrical production has its own kind of preparatory research and fieldwork, display of artifacts, and representation of social life through carefully selected details of human action" (141). If a writers goal is giving the reader a sense of "being there," the ethnotheatre should also attempt to recreate as much authentic reproduction onstage as possible.

“The narration, monologue, dialogue all combined must ring true to life to evoke the world of participants” (142). If done correctly, the ethnotheatre will give audience members more than just a sense of “being *there*” but, rather a distinct feeling of “being *here*” during the performance.

Some well known models which incorporate participant interviews into monologue and dialogue include one of Broadway’s biggest hits *A Chorus Line* originally written by director/choreographer Michael Bennett. He had a desire to create a show which put the spotlight on unknown dancers and captured their struggle, their rejection, and their sacrifices. In 1974, he rented a studio and invited twenty-four dancers to participate in an interview about their personal and professional lives. The sessions were recorded, written down, and eventually seventeen characters emerged who would sing and dance about their stressful experiences trying to break into the limelight. *A Chorus Line* revolutionized the way audiences viewed traditional musical theatre because for once the play was voicing the struggles of real people. It broke box office records and won almost every possible award including 9 Tony Awards, 5 Drama Desk Awards, the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award, the London Evening Standard Award, a special citation Obie Award, and even a Gold Record Award from Columbia Records; no one ever anticipated, not even Bennett himself, that a few interviews with participants who had a lot to say would explode into such a pop-culture phenomena.

The Vagina Monologues by Eve Ensler is another popular example of an ethnodrama which involves only women as the participant interviewees to create monologues. Ensler’s interviews began as casual conversations with her girlfriends but it surprisingly sparked a continuous chain of women open and willing to discuss personal issues. By 1996, she interviewed over two hundred women about their views on sex, relationships, violence against

women etc. Initially Ensler performed every monologue herself, with succeeding performances featuring three actresses, and more recent versions featuring a different actress for every role. What is unique, as well as humorous, about Ensler's work is that every monologue somehow relates to a woman's vagina, whether the topic is sex, love, rape, menstruation, birth etc. A prominent theme throughout the piece is the vagina as a tool of female empowerment, and the personification of individuality.

Not only has Broadway adapted an ethnodrama to the stage but, Hollywood has also adapted a controversial ethnodrama onto the big screen: *The Laramie Project* by Moisés Kaufman and members of the Tectonic Theater Project is a groundbreaking ethnodrama dealing with hate crimes and issues of immorality, sexuality, and justice. The play was written after the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming: The murder is widely considered to be a hate crime motivated by homophobia. In the aftermath of the beating, and during the trial of the two men accused of Shepard's murder, the theatre company members made six trips to Laramie over the course of a year and a half to conduct their own research on what really occurred. They interviewed over two hundred inhabitants of the town, and included their journal entries when compiling together the play. The final product of the play was divided into three acts with eight actors portraying more than sixty characters in a series of short yet moving scenes.

Ethnodramas give writers the freedom to address any topic they feel passionate about, whether it's struggles immigrant are having as ESL-Speaking Immigrant Women's Disillusions illustrates, religious differences in a specific country like Ethnodrama: The Dramatic Religion in Haiti, or trying to show the world how a certain group of people lives as Street Rat demonstrates. The play can be directed towards any society dealing with struggles; the color of their skin, their religion, their income etc. doesn't matter. It can address sexual topics like homophobia does in

The Laramie Project or paint a picture of living life with a debilitating disease as Expressions of Personhood in Alzheimer's does. The amount of information and inspiration one may take from life and put down on paper is infinite: All of my research has inspired me to create an ethnodrama addressing women's issues in modern day theatre.

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